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ABSTRACT

The author argues that children learn best when they are exposed to literature of good quality, such as that chosen for her magazine, "Cricket." With literature as the focus, the good teacher can develop a fully correlated language arts program. Using quality material in a lively and entertaining manner, "Cricket" lays foundations for the humanities, the social sciences, and the sciences. (AA)

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The Importance and Use of Quality Literature in the Classroom

Marianne Carus

Members of the NCTE and visitors

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Several months ago when I had to send in an official title for this speech, I chose the most general I could think of, "Children's Literature and the Language Arts." Actually what I am going to speak about is: The Importance and Use of Quality Literature in the Classroom. But before I start I want to ask you a question: Do any of you remember a favorite book you read when you were children? Your very favorite book. One you loved so much that you couldn't help read it over and over and pass on to your friends. A book that not only possessed you but also changed you in some way, opening up new worlds and dimensions and making you grow just a bit older and more mature. You are probably still attached to these books of your childhood. You may have read them to your own children or brought them to your classes to share them with your students. The peculiar thing is that these books of substance don't pale with age.

Mark Twain once wrote in a letter: "I conceive that the right way to write a story for boys is to write so that it will interest any man who has ever been a boy."

And C.S. Lewis tells us that: "No book is really worth reading at the age of ten that is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty."

And lastly a quote from Edward Blishen, another famous British author, who said: "My expectation of life is largely taken from the books I read as a child."

That is a powerful testimony and could not state more clearly what an important part good books play in the development of a child.

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In order to learn from it, a child has to love the book he reads. You can't help learning from someone or something you love.

In a short article Take a Book Wherever You Go in the December '74 issue of CRICKET Joan Aiken says, "A book you love is like a friend. It is like home. There is always something new to find in a book, however often you read it. When you read a story you do something that no animal can do, however well trained; only man can do it; you are stepping out of your mind into someone else's. You are listening to the thoughts of another person. While doing this, you are making your own mind work. And making your own mind work is the most interesting thing there is to do."

When children make their minds work they can't help but learn something, and that is precisely what we want them to do. You as teachers and educators, and we as publishers and editors, want children to absorb ideas from books which may remain with them for the rest of their lives and help shape their personalities. That is why we have this great responsibility to offer them only what Walter de la Mare called the rarest kind of best in anything. Only that is good enough for the young.

Our goal for our own Correlated Language Arts Program and for our magazine CRICKET was and is quality, not only in the selection of the reading materials, but also in illustrations, layout, design, and production. During one radio interview last year the reviewer asked me: "Well, Mrs. Carus, you're always talking about quality, could you explain to us what quality is?" Now I am sure that everyone here knows what qulity is, or at least has a pretty good idea--and everyone would probably have a different interpretation. My own interpretation would be (and this is what I told the man) that quality is something that lasts. If you buy

a dress of good quality it will last longer--you can wear it for many years. The same is true for quality in everything else, including books. A good book or story lasts, wears well, is substantial. You can go back to it again and again. We hear from many of our CRICKET readers that they are wearing out their CRICKETs because they love to reread stories. That, to me, is a sign of quality.

Another sign of quality is the integrity of each single selection chosen for children. The honesty and soundness of each story or poem, and furthermore its literary excellence, apparent in plot, characterization, style, originality of concept, and intensity of feeling. An excellent children's book has an exciting, satisfying story, but also an idea behind the plot, a set of values.

Why do some books last and are read by one generation after another? We said it is their quality, manifest in either a magnificent, breathtaking story full of adventure and incident or in unforgettable characters, masterfully described and developed. The Greek myths, for example, the adventure tales of Odysseus or Theseus, the story of the Trojan Horse, are all just as alive today as they were centuries ago. It is their wealth of dramatic incident that captures the child's imagination. The Secret Garden on the other hand shows brilliant characterization in the slow and utterly believable transformation of its heroine. Children are fascinated by this development in character in realistic fiction, so much so that they tend to identify with the book's heroine. You all have experienced how a children's book managed to make you feel good and safe and comfortable because of its family settings and descriptions. Books like Little Women, Heidi, or the Little House books transcend their time--they have a truly universal

quality of warmth and authenticity. And although a few of the old classics are attacked today as "sentimental Victorian tear-jerkers" many children still love them. One little girl rose to the defense of Black Beauty and said to her teacher, "But when you read Black Beauty you feel like a horse." It is uncanny how children can sort out the genuine from the false--that is if we have given them a chance to grow up with good literature.

"It is a matter of supreme significance," says Frances Clarke Sayers, "that even the youngest children, in the period of their first reading experience, are capable of responding to the great elements of art: to drama and originality, to conflict and resolution, to feeling of place and atmosphere, to the emotions of fear and love and hate, to the inevitability of character and the mystery of personality, to humor and nonsense, to truth, and to the wizardry of words in the hands of the masters. What judges of books children become once they are interested in reading! For judgement grows by what it feeds upon."

Children's literature in all its variety has to be part of each young child's basic language arts curriculum--it has to be the center, the focus of the English lesson. You can picture literature as the hub of the wheel of different language arts activities, such as speaking, listening, reading aloud, spelling, usage, grammar, writing, and composition.

Unfortunately in many of our schools, the teaching of reading and the teaching of literature are generally regarded as entirely separate issues. The teaching of reading, the methodology as such, is considered the important concern, and literature itself is a luxury, something that can be offered as a supplement, if there is time left at the end of the week. Many basic readers that teach

to read have their own carefully controlled vocabulary, words counted out and repeated ad infinitum in rather lifeless, pedestrian, and dull selections that cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called literature and that do nothing to spark a child's interest in reading. Literature on the other hand feeds the imagination of children and develops in them a desire to read. If children find out that there's a good story or poem in their readers they may double their efforts to learn how to read in order to be able to read that story. That's why even in the earliest grades traditional rhymes, such as Mother Goose, fables, folk and fairy tales are absolutely essential for the teaching and then practicing of reading. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for the teacher to read aloud in Kindergarten, first grade, and later as often as time allows.

After the mechanics of reading are mastered, and with a good phonics program, most children have learned to read in the first semester of first grade, a good literature program in their language arts curriculum becomes even more important.

In order to stimulate children with many different interests, the literature in their readers has to have as much variety as possible. Stories of imaginative adventure and fantasy, fairy tales, folk tales, myths, and fables are most important (and I will say more about fantasy later) but we will have to satisfy other children who are interested in facts, in the sciences, and natural sciences, in history, biography, animal life, and also children who can appreciate a sensitive, serious poem. All these selections are read by the entire class, and because they are alive and rich in inner qualities, they easily lend themselves to discussion in the classroom. I don't mean only factual questions about content, but "how" and "why" questions

of interpretation and evaluation that will deepen the child's understanding of different levels of meaning in stories and of development of character and plot. This will also help him immeasurably with the study of literature in higher grades. These so called thought questions don't necessarily have just one answer but frequently are open ended and bring out different opinions. The teacher herself will have to be very familiar with the story under discussion and guide the children's enthusiasm back to the text or to other similar stories known by the class. Discussion is a difficult art. Gilbert Highet has called it "the ultimate art of teaching."

Some important questions can be answered in writing, in essay writing, and the child will be encouraged to bring the new images and ideas of the story to paper. I don't have to emphasize this, you know how important the almost lost art of writing or composition is for our children today. Writing organizes your thoughts, and "learning to write is learning to think" said Dr. Baker at Princeton University. He calls learning to write "the hardest, most important thing any child does." A recent article in Newsweek entitled, "Why Johnny Can't Write" exposes some nationwide statistics on literacy in this country--which are indeed frightening. I have no time to go into this in greater detail, and perhaps you have read the article or heard about it. A child's own writing or composition is one of the important language activities, especially because spelling, grammar, and syntax can so easily be taught through it.

The beauty of making literature the central part of any language arts program is that it correlates all activities from listening, reading, reciting poetry, dramatization through the final accomplishment of oral and written discussion and interpretation. With literature as the focus you can develop a truly

correlated language arts program.

More and more schools are now using CRICKET in their English lessons, and therefore we are preparing Teacher's Guides for the different issues. The CRICKET League contests in creative story and poetry writing and drawing bring in up to 500 entries a week, among these quite a few from classrooms.

Unfortunately there is one small flaw in what I have said so far. The best literature program, the best readers will only be half as effective unless they are taught with love and enthusiasm. That is why you are so important. You have to pass on your own love of books to the children who are in your care, and the more you yourselves have read, the better informed you are, the more you can inspire your children.

In his republic, Plato talks about the education of children. What is important about education of young people, he says, is not to teach them this or that, but to create in them an imagination. Imagination, he implies, is the machine with which we create the world for ourselves, and without imagination, education is more or less useless. He proposed to educate children with stories, folk tales, and myths. These, he suggested, were the ideal grounding for the future citizen. In a recent article in the New Yorker entitled, "Reflections, The Uses of Enchantment," Bruno Bettelheim, the famous educator and therapist, supports this view of the classic Greek philosopher. I quote, "The idea, that by learning to read one may be able later to enrich one's life is experienced as an empty promise when the stories that the child listens to or reads are vacuous. For a story to truly hold a child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But for a story to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination, help him to develop his intellect and to

clarify his emotions, be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations, give full recognition to his difficulties, suggest solutions to the problems that perturb him, and promote confidence in himself and his future. In all these respects and many others, nothing in the entire range of children's literature--with rare exceptions--can be as enriching and satisfying to child and adult alike as the folk fairy tale...From them a child can learn more about the inner problems of man, and about solutions to his own predicaments....than he can from any other type of story within his comprehension." In this very important article that previews his not yet published book The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales, Bettelheim describes in detail how folk and fairy tales help to stimulate a child's imagination and bring order into the turmoil of his feelings.

I want to juxtapose this to the arrogant demands and considerable pressures from many different sources to include more so called realistic stories in CRICKET.

We have been asked by interviewers and critics why we (quote) "are not following the trend toward relevant stories, dealing with sex, drugs, broken homes, abortion, perversion." As you know there is much emphasis--too much, I think--on didactic social realism in some of today's children's books. Too much at least for smaller children who should not be pushed out of childhood and into the problems of adolescence too soon, and who should not be given materials they aren't yet able to digest.

Adult concerns have been forced further and further back down into the lower grades, where children are invited to comment on the world's problems. An enormous amount of raw information pours out over TV. Manners have begun to change. Ten-year-olds wear bras, twelve-year-olds date, fifteen-year-olds are on the pill. Some

reviewers have even asked, "does childhood still exist in the 1970's"

This all sounds very upsetting, but I can reassure you that although children are undoubtedly much more sophisticated today than let's say 50 years ago, childhood still exists as a separate, lively, and healthy category. We receive over 500 love letters a week from children, love that has nothing to do with sex or drugs but everything with enthusiasm and devotion. (read 1 letter only)

Childhood is alive and well and seems to react to such a seeminly old-fashioned pleasure as reading a good story and getting a lot of fun and satisfaction out of it.

In CRICKET we try to present quality material in a lively and entertaining manner and the children respond to it. We also try to keep in mind what Paul Hazard wrote in his famous Books, Children & Men, "I like stories that have taste and moderation and plant in the child's soul a seed that develops from the inside."

With our language arts program and with CRICKET we want to "plant seeds," lay foundations, develop awareness and concepts for the humanities, the sciences, the social sciences. With the stories in CRICKET and our Language Arts Program we want to subtly introduce the most important and basic values of our culture. We want to give our little CRICKET readers heroes and examples of courage, justice, honesty, and endurance. We want to give them a sense of the whole world by letting them read stories translated from the French, Italian, German or Chinese, stimulating their curiosity, their imagination, and their sense of wonder.

Well, you can see that we don't agree with Marshall McLuhan who inclines to believe that the entire reading experience is a thing of the past. We know that there are many forces in our life today that could separate children and books, and we know that we have a great responsibility not to let this happen. We don't believe it will

ever happen.